

Labour Historians as Labour Intellectuals: Generations and Crises

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Over the last nine decades or so, Australian labour historians have been involved in a massive, ongoing, fractious, collective intellectual project. Together, they have written the history of Australian labour institutions; the history of class relations; the history of work; the history of community; the history of labour's political thought; the history of working-class culture; and the history of how class intersects with gender, race and sexuality. At various moments, the project has been criticised, defended, ironically eulogised, remade and recovered. It has been attacked as politically-motivated; theoretically underdeveloped; communistic; nationalistic; masculinist; naive; overly critical; overly celebratory; old-fashioned and intellectually marginal.

Nine decades? Recurrent crises? These terms are not common currency among labour historians, who prefer to date their subject from its entry into the academy forty years ago, and who think of intellectual crisis as their particular generational burden. We suggest in this article that labour historians should think more deeply about themselves. There are new questions to be asked, not about the past but about what makes a labour historian, and how the answers to these questions affect the discovery of the past. Scholars suspicious of navel-gazing and abstract theorizing, and more concerned with the working class than with intellectual biography, have seldom posed such questions. However, even a brief history of labour historians as labour intellectuals sheds light on the status and nature of what we do, and places contemporary debates concerning the apparent 'crisis' of labour history in a more sober perspective. To stimulate research we sketch below three generational moments in the history of labour history intellectuals.

The first generation of labour historians exemplified the movement tradition of intellectual life. It was their project to provide an historical dimension to the collective identity of the movement. They appeared at the same time as majority Labor governments were formed, their presence increased as the movement grappled with competing political visions in the 20s and 30s, and they provided cultural resources to labour in its period of national leadership in the 40s. They imagined their audience as the union and party activists among whom they worked as journalists, organisers, and advisers. They were keenly aware of each other's work. Although from different social backgrounds their history was written for, and disseminated through, the labour movement. That is, no doubt, why most of them have disappeared from the chronicles of academic historiography – even to some extent from those accounts written by labour historians.

The most dazzling of this first generation, Gordon Childe, wrote *How Labour Governs* – the world's first study of parliamentary socialism – while working as political adviser to John Storey, Labor Premier of New South Wales. Bob Ross, pioneer labour journalist, wrote a popular account of the Eureka Stockade in 1916. His son, Lloyd, although University trained, directed

his historical writings to the movement. His 'A Worker Looks at Australian History' was serialised in the Melbourne journal *Union Voice* during 1927 and 28. He went on to write historical guides for the members of the Australian Railways Union. In Sydney, Sam Rosa undertook one of the most ambitious historical writing projects ever seen in Australia – perhaps longer even than Manning Clark's *History*. For almost three years between 1926 and 29 he contributed a weekly instalment to the *Labor Daily* of his 'A Political History of Australia' – a detailed and zesty narrative of the fight against oppression by the peoples of Australia – convicts, diggers, farmers, Aborigines, workers, women. University graduates, Esmonde Higgins and Jim Rawling, spread their versions of Australia's history through labour's educational channels, the Plebs League, the Workers Educational Association, the Left Book Club, and the Communist press. These are just the best known of the labour educators who taught history in trade union, party, and labour college circles in this period. The most accomplished researcher among this first generation, Brian Fitzpatrick, who never gained a university position, wrote defiantly for a labour audience, as he proclaimed in the famous preface to his *A Short History of the Australian Labor Movement* (which was published by Rawson's Bookshop in Melbourne).

By the time this movement-targeted history declined in the mid-1950s it had achieved a recognisable labour counterpoint to the dominant themes of national history. Whereas in the schools, universities and popular press, history was about 'settlement, self-government, economic development, nationalism and national identity' (Merritt, 114), in the labour movement it was about oppression, resistance, democracy, and imperialism. It had recorded and celebrated the events of the labour mobilisation. Now however that mobilisation had been checked by the election of conservative governments and a debilitating split in the movement. At its best this history was an alternative public history of popular struggle. Now a revamped bourgeois hegemony had undermined the confidence of labour intellectuals in the power of the people. Australia was no longer 'Godzone' country; the working class could not be relied on to act as a unified historical subject. This was a political crisis for the labour movement, but it was also an intellectual crisis for labour intellectuals. The institutions to which they addressed their work were now contracting, while the organising assumptions that had guided their histories were becoming increasingly untenable. It was out of this 'crisis' that the second generational moment of labour history emerged in the early 1960s.

The second generational moment in Australian labour history was symbolized by the establishment of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History in 1961. The Society reflected wider intellectual migrations, as a group of labour intellectuals, among them Bob Gollan, Eric Fry and Ian Turner, redirected their intellectual labour from the institutions of the labour movement, such as the Communist Party of Australia, to the

growing history departments of post-war Australian universities. They brought many of the practices and concerns of the labour movement with them – collective work, political engagement, and an interest in radical nationalism. However, like other disaffected ex-Communists, these intellectuals exercised a more pluralist, questioning perspective than they had as labour activists. The first Annual General Meeting of the Society, in August 1962, was able to draw upon corresponding committees in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth, Hobart, Launceston, Armidale and Newcastle, to supplement the work of the Canberra-based Executive Committee. Alongside academic historians such as Bede Nairn and Frank Crowley, were the Secretary of the Australian Railways' Union in Sydney, Lloyd Ross; Sam Merrifield, Victorian Labor M.L.C.; and A. MacDonald, the Secretary of the Trades and Labor Council of Queensland.

The journal *Labour History* was established as a point of connection and exploration between these various regional, institutional, and ideological perspectives. This was an historical moment in which the journal was supplementing the party as a means of political expression, and the establishment of *Labour History* was mirrored in the establishment of other left-wing journals, among them *Arena*, *Outlook*, *Dissent*, and *Australian Left Review*. The work produced by this generation of scholars was critical, varied, and important. It searched for the causes of political mobilisation, it historically examined the most cherished assumptions of the labour movement, and it joined a commitment to the labour movement with a respect for historical evidence and a flair for narrative. Earlier intellectuals such as Ross, Childe, and Fitzpatrick, had examined the history of the Australian working-class movement as a way of writing a version of national history. The labour historians of the second generation, concerned to bring a range of ideologies and perspectives to the study of working-class history, were less hegemonic in their aims. Nonetheless, assisted by the professional opportunities of the academic teaching and research system, they proceeded with a greater concentration of purpose. As a complex and rewarding intellectual project, *Labour History* had arrived.

The shift from the movement intellectual tradition had also repositioned the role of crisis in labour history's project. Indeed, reflecting the institutional difference between the university and the movement, this change highlighted difficult questions about contemporary working-class politics. As a result 'crisis' was no longer a culminating moment but an ever present possibility. Labour history had to question continually the status and significance of itself and its subject.

Only five years after its inception *Labour History* carried a symposium on 'What is Labour History?', in which the social history alternative was posed. We were enjoined to study the totality of social relations. Three years later McQueen's *A New Britannia* announced the New Left attack on 'the safe pastures' of labour history. We were exhorted to study history to make the revolution. During the 70s special issues of the journal highlighted the gendered and racist aspects of working-class history. In 1981, the editor acknowledged that its new subtitle, 'A Journal of Labour and Social History' was probably overdue. By the late 80s the sense that there were many labour histories was confirmed by studies of workers' culture informed by post-colonial thinking about representations and discourse. The tendency of labour history to embark on periodic bursts of auto-critique and reformulation had become in thirty years an intellectual tradition, underpinned by the growing distance in the relationship of labour historians to the labour movement.

Changes in the politics and class composition of the intelligentsia also contributed to this tradition of critical reformulation. The New Left found its social base in the

movements of campus revolt in the 1960s and 70s. Second wave feminism and Aboriginal activism had inspired and drawn strength from labour history's engagement with gender and race. The leadership of the new social movements was recruited from university-trained intellectuals who increasingly defined their politics against that of the 'old' labour movement. They displaced class analysis and materialist methods with theories of post-structuralism and post-modernism. Thus, in contrast to the founding moment of the Society and journal at the beginning of the 60s, the critique of the 80s began to flow from the universities to the labour movement. Meanwhile the labour movement was itself subject to decline and defeat. Many of the institutions and constituencies that were important to traditional labour history ceased to exist. Many of those that remained now contained less of the élan and culture of a 'movement', instead becoming increasingly professional. In this situation the evocation of 'crisis' among some labour historians could be used to mask a new commitment: to the 'hidden class project' of the intelligentsia.

This brings us to the third generational moment, the present. Labour historians have responded as *intellectuals* to the recent developments described above in two ways. Some responded by ceasing to function as labour intellectuals. Within the universities labour history lost its sense of being on the cutting edge with the passing of the New Left. Just as class analysis had fallen from favour as radical social theory, labour history lost its status within departments of history and politics. At the same time the downsizing of these traditional locations for labour historians led to the migration of labour history to other academic departments, so that in the 1990s only half of the academic contributors to *Labour History* came from history departments. Both of these changes put pressure on the form that labour history could take within universities. While there are still labour historians in universities who retain a commitment to the labour movement, these developments allowed many former labour historians to effectively secede, abandoning any interest in the history of the working class.

The second response, among those who continued to identify themselves as labour historians, was to further widen the scope of their activities and interests. In *Labour History* since 1990 one quarter of the authors of refereed articles have not been university teachers or researchers. This reflects in part the successful revival of the Labour History Society, especially the expansion of its branches, many of which have their own journals catering for a mainly non-academic audience. The society now provides an increasingly important, non-academic forum of popular history and debate. A number of labour historians within universities have reflected and promoted this movement by focusing upon the histories of specific communities and regions. Others have focused on the history of the major institutions that have reached substantial landmarks and anniversaries, or else recently passed away. Others still have attempted to actively preserve the history of the movement, cooperating with members of the labour movement in attempts to catalogue and maintain labour heritage. In a sense, this represents a reactivation of the earlier, founding conception of labour history as closely linked to the labour movement. However, in another sense, this reincarnation of the movement tradition of the labour historian exists in a less critical relationship, reflecting in part a feeling that the labour movement is in a desperate situation. Celebratory rather than critical history now dominates labour history publications, perhaps for the first time.

However, if the project of labour history has been subject to persistent reinvention, then what is it that defines the work of the labour historian? Drawing from the historical sketch already presented, we would suggest that labour history is

defined by five primary characteristics. While not all labour history has completely expressed these tendencies, they do mark off the (itself historical) project of labour history from the work of other Australian historians. They also highlight the novelty of labour history as an intellectual project.

We would suggest that labour history is a *popular, collective, democratic, regional, and political form of history-writing*. Clearly, it has grown out of the *popular* history written by labour activists earlier in the century; history that was non-academic, committed, and reflective of the political mobilisation of the working class. While this is undeniably somewhat diluted, it has been preserved in contemporary labour history. The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History links both academic and non-academic historians of the labour movement, and its national journal, *Labour History*, regularly contains non-academic writing. Secondly, labour history in Australia is also *collective*, not defined primarily on the basis of canonical monographs by individual scholars, but rather through the varied contribution of a vast range of historians to conferences, anthologies, and to the *Labour History* journal. Equally, it is *democratic*, opening up the space for criticism of its most treasured verities, and consistently encouraging contributions from younger, emergent scholars. Fourthly, it is *regional*, organised on the basis of strong regional associations with their own journals and meetings, and persistently displaying a strong interest in the local histories of the working-class movement. Finally, labour history in Australia is also *political*, written to advance and enrich a changing labour movement – a history with a broader social and political purpose.

Together, these characteristics imply that labour historians have as much in common with the various writers, editors, and political leaders of the labour movement as they do with their colleagues in university departments. They mediate between the demands of academia and those of the movement through their commitment to a popular, collective, democratic, regional, and political form of

history-writing. Indeed, labour historians must be understood as labour intellectuals of a certain sort, and their efforts to be historians both of and for the labour movement are among the most ambitious and innovative attempted by intellectuals in this country. The persistent 'crises' and generational renewals of Australian labour history have so far tended to consolidate rather than undermine these characteristics. Whether this will remain so will be determined not only by the conditions and constraints that academic intellectuals face, but by the unfolding history of the labour movement itself.

A Note on Sources

As this is a sketch about intellectual life we have not attempted to cite labour history's literature to support our argument. We should acknowledge our debt however to certain works and refer readers to a fuller discussion of labour intellectuals:

Bob Connell, 'The Idea of Class in Australian Social Science' in his *Ruling Class, Ruling Culture – Studies of Conflict, Power and Hegemony in Australian Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977; Peter Beilharz, 'Labour History and Social Theory' in T. Irving (ed.) *Challenges to Labour History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1994; Verity Burgmann, 'The Strange Death of Labour History' in Australian Labor Party, New South Wales Branch, *Bede Nairn and Labor History*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1991; Ron Eyerman, *Between Culture and Politics – Intellectuals in Modern Society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994; Terry Irving and Sean Scalmer, 'Australian Labour Intellectuals – an Introduction', *Labour History*, 77, November 1999; Ira Katznelson, 'The "Bourgeois" Dimension: A Provocation about Institutions, Politics, and the Future of Labor History', *International Labor and Working Class History*, 46, Fall 1994; John Merritt, 'Labour History' in G. Osborne and W.F. Mandle (eds), *New History – Studying Australia Today*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1982.